

## IS EURIPIDES A WOMAN HATER ?

尤里披底憎恨女人嗎？

(A Study of the Medea)

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Euripides, the last Greek tragic dramatist, is often regarded as the most modern Greek writer. Although Sophocles and Aeschylus could evoke at least as much terror and pity, the qualities that have drawn the twentieth century most to Euripides are his attitude towards the familiar Greek subjects and heroes, his sympathies, and his frame of mind. He has a profound influence upon the drama, has been the center of the awakened interest in Greece, and has had his followers in every age. Poets like Virgil, Milton, Racine, and Shelley owed the Greek and fell under his spell. But, above all, unlike Aeschylus, he is not predominantly interested in religion and theology, but rather in ethical and social problems, in human beings confronting the pain and evil of human life. The strongest claim of Euripides to be renowned as a social theorist is his study of women—their character, their position in contemporary society, their responsibilities, and their possibilities. One might devote several lectures to this subject alone, for it is a feature, before other features, in the work of Euripides, and has arrested attention in every age in which he has been intelligently studied.

It is amazing that many distinguished commentators should accept the traditional belief that Euripides is a woman hater. It is also ridiculous that such a charge could be seriously brought against the creator of Alcestis and Phaedra, Macaria and Polyxena, Andromache, and Iphigenia. On the contrary, he has made them subtle by giving them good sense with the knowledge of evil as well as good. Not Voltaire, Not Tolstoy have defended womanhood with a keener weapon than the Medea. Take for example the climax of Medea's claim of her sex:

"Men say we women lead a sheltered life  
At home, while they face death amid the spears.  
The fools! I had rather stand in the battle line  
Thrice, than once bear a child."

Is there anything like it in dramatic literature till we come to *A Doll's House*?—

Torvald: No man ever sacrifices his honour, even for one's love.

Nora: Millions of women have done so.

In describing the sorrows of women Euripides shows a knowledge of the female heart and emotions. It is said that he was twice married and both marriages ended unhappily. Unhappy his married life may have been, but there is good evidence that he has a first-hand understanding of the fair sex. Few men unaided could have written that marvellous first speech of Medea. A version of part of it is quoted in the following, for it is extremely important from several points of view. We know the position of Medea, a foreigner at Corinth, seeing herself and her young children on the point of being deserted by Jason. Now she is addressing the company of Corinthian ladies who have come to condole with her.

"Now, as for me, this unlooked-for happening hath broken my heart. Friends, I am lost. The joy of life hath left me, and I fain would die. For, as ye know well, he, my husband, in whom were all my hopes, hath shown himself an utter villain. Of all creatures that have life and reason we women are the most unhappy. For, first, by payment of much wealth we must needs purchase a husband, a master of our persons.... And herein lies a fearful peril: will he be base or good? For the wife is disgraced by divorce, yet to refuse marriage is impossible. Then, when a woman has come to live with a strange character and strange ways of life, she must needs have second-sight (for her past experience tells her nothing) if she is to know how to deal with her husband. If, then, we solve this riddle, and the spouse who dwells with us proves not a brutal yoke-fellow, our life is to be envied; otherwise, death were best. When a man is wearied of his home, he walks abroad and relieves his spirit of its distaste in the society of some friend or companion; but we are forced to look to one person only. And they say of us that we pass within the house a life unthreatened by any peril, whereas they engage in the toil of war. Fools! I had rather fight three pitched battles than face the pains of childbirth once. But no more. What is true of me cannot be said of thee. Thou hast this city and thy father's house, a happy life, and the company of friends; while I, deserted and homeless, am outraged by my husband, I that have been reft from a foreign land and have no mother, no brother, no kinsman, to whom, as to a haven, I may flee from this calamity. This, then, will I ask of thee, this only. If I discover some means, some plot, whereby to win revenge for these my wrongs from my

husband, from him that gave his daughter, and from herself, be silent. In all things else a woman is full of dread and dares not look upon battles and the sword; but if she is wronged in her affections, there is no other soul so murderous."

It is only one example among many that could be cited of the poet's subtle sympathy and understanding of women, an understanding, no doubt, helped by his love for children.

Now let us turn our attention to the last few words in which Medea hints to the Corinthian ladies that she has a plan of vengeance. This does not mean that Euripides followed his contemporary attitude towards women, namely, to treat them as a menace to society. He understood well the frightful explosive force of an adult in its passions and its will, but in intellectual weakness and unbalanced impulsiveness a child. At all costs, he felt, we must recast our social system and open to women activities which can afford them to develop healthily. In his time, the harem-system prevailed at Athens. The curse of this Athenian system was, according to him, that it stunted all a woman's good qualities, while it left her free to indulge her cruel or thoughtless whims. That is why Andromache is led by her own unguided impulses into crime and Medea, a woman of pride and courage, is goaded by her wrongs into crime, too.

Of course Euripides' lesson applies, at the utmost, only partly to us in the twentieth century, for in every respect the condition of women is not now so spiritually and intellectually debased as it was in Athens during the fifth century B. C. Yet it is an undeniable fact that Euripides has made wonderfully penetrating and illuminating study of female character. Far more than this, several of his finest works are devoted, almost exclusively, to this theme—the Medea, the Hippolytus, the Alceste, and the Andromache. It is not so much that he admires women, still less that he hates them. His subtle and true delineations bring out as many faults as virtues. He is impressed by two points: first, the sorrows of women, whether they suffer from special hardships which no social scheme can take from their shoulders; second, the danger to the society which lies in allowing a great many of people live on without attempting to understand them. In all these cases his opinions are plain and admirably expressed. In all he is observing, not the heroine of legend, but the contemporary Athenian woman. In all, too, he is striving to create a sound public opinion. He thinks of women, therefore, as a man of human sympathies, and as a citizen of political foresight.

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